
Jim Hoagland

Saddam's Game

George Bush has responded to Saddam Hussein's last spiteful finger in the eye with a punch in the nose, which the Iraqi leader all but demanded. In the Middle East, parting gifts are not limited to coffee-table picture books or silver cigarette boxes.

Going out with a bang should not be all there is to Bush's goodbye to Saddam. There is still time—and need—for Bush, in consultation with President-elect Clinton, to give a broad political response to Saddam's most recent misbehavior. The U.S. response should impose enduring political costs on the Iraqi dictator that will outlive yesterday's limited military retaliation.

It would be a mistake to assume that Saddam blundered into this last-minute punch-up. The Iraqi sought it, in part to underline what American bumper stickers predicted six months ago: George Bush is out of a job. Saddam still has his.

But this is not just taunting bumper-stickerism writ large. Saddam, as a tyrannical despot in good standing, does not shrink from violence. He sees it as a useful, purifying tool that must be used periodically, especially against his own people. Ending his personal war with Bush on a defiant note sets the stage for an attempt by Saddam at a political comeback.

Snarling as one president fades into the sunset,

Saddam is now positioned to smile at the incoming Clinton team, offering to let bygones be bygones if sanctions can be eased a little. Saddam put a post-Bush smile offensive on call last year by naming Nizar Hamdoon, his most talented snake-oil merchant, as ambassador to the United Nations and unofficial envoy to the United States. You send Hamdoon to deal, not to pursue confrontation.

Clinton is unlikely to fall into that trap. But the way Saddam played out his transition challenge suggests that he is after a bigger target as well. Saddam's actions show that he has adopted a long-term strategy of driving a wedge between the U.S.-led coalition that carried out yesterday's raid and the suddenly overextended, underpowered United Nations.

Saddam does his bit to undermine the halfway, legalistic approach of U.N. peace-keeping, which has reached the edge of failure in Cambodia and ex-Yugoslavia and faces enormous challenges in Somalia and Angola.

This was apparent in the humiliating challenge the Iraqis mounted this month to the weak U.N. ground force that is supposed to police the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. Iraqis retrieved Silkworm missiles and other equipment from under the noses of the unarmed U.N. command, and then countered

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its complaints with the kind of lawyers' arguments the United Nations takes seriously.

Saddam saw the weak performance of the U.N. Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission, which administers the newly defined border between Iraq and Kuwait and the small demilitarized zone it divides, as encouragement. U.S. military officials had been strongly pressing the U.N. observation mission to destroy the Silkworm missiles, but the U.N. unit procrastinated and then let the Iraqis walk off with them.

Saddam also launched and then halted a campaign of terrorism against U.N. truck convoys bringing food and supplies to the Kurds in the north. But the convoys have halted too: Drivers are now too frightened to take on the mission, and the Kurds are in desperate condition, as Saddam intended.

These actions were not the trigger for yesterday's bombing. Instead, in a raid that was both punitive and proportionate, U.S., French and British warplanes bombed antiaircraft missiles Saddam has used to threaten American aircraft throughout this month.

For Saddam the limited nature of this round represents a certain progress. His war with Bush has taught him to operate in a gray area that

forces difficult choices on his opponents. This is a shift for a dictator accustomed to brutal, all-out confrontation.

But Saddam's broader offensive needs to be met with a broad political response coordinated by Bush and Clinton. Kuwaiti troops should replace the U.N. observation mission on the Kuwaiti side of the border, backed up by the U.S. troops Bush ordered dispatched to Kuwait yesterday. The United States should also seek to have the no-fly zone expanded to all of Iraq and go back to demanding that southern Iraq be demilitarized as a security zone for the Shiites, as the north is for the Kurds.

These moves were recommended by senior administration officials in the crisis management team known as the Deputies Committee at the end of the Gulf war. But they were rejected by the U.S. military as too complicated and entangling. There was hope then, shared by Bush, that Saddam would "stay in his box" and not provoke new confrontations.

That represented a hope that a leopard could not just change his spots but abandon them altogether. It turned out to be illusory. Bush should now seize his last opportunity to build a sturdier political cage around the still dangerous leopard he leaves behind.